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SUBJECT: SALEH'S CHARM OFFENSIVE: YEMENI PRESIDENT ATTEMPTS TO WOO
INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES THROUGH RECENT INTERVIEWS

¶1. (Summary) During the week of November 24, 2008, President Ali Abdullah Saleh conducted two high-profile, on-the-record interviews with international media outlets in France and Russia. In the context of these interviews, Saleh outlined his government's views on counter-terrorism strategy in Yemen, American foreign policy, the issue of Yemeni detainees in Guantanamo, the upcoming parliamentary elections and the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Aden. In what some observers have called a "charm offensive," Saleh took the opportunity to take his message directly to two important European audiences for Yemen. While most of Saleh's remarks were predictable, his comments on Israel - whereby he admits to "believe in its existence" - would seem to be a break with previous public statements by the ROYG. (End Summary).

COUNTER-TERRORISM EFFORTS IN YEMEN

¶2. As expected, the bulk of Saleh's recent interviews were dedicated to the issue of counter-terrorism. On "Russia Today", a daily Russian news program, Saleh outlined what he sees as Yemen's role in combating terrorism, claiming the ROYG to be in the "first tier" of governments in addressing this issue. Saleh described CT cooperation with external powers like the US and the EU as an "exchange of information" as part of an international CT strategy. Saleh described Yemeni terrorists as "ignorant and think that they will settle their accounts with the outside world through these [terrorist] acts. This is a misapprehension. The only thing that suffers is the country itself....In reality, they are committing destructive terrorist actions which harm their own country."

¶3. On French TV, Saleh focused on recent successes by ROYG security in rolling up suspected terrorists. In the period after the September 17 attack on the US Embassy in Sana'a, Saleh makes the claim that, "the government has strengthened its arrangements to deal with terrorist operations and increased its efforts to pursue and to catch terrorist elements. Those who have been arrested are now in prison to allow for the investigation of them to be completed. The security forces are pursuing the rest of the Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist cells in preparation to arrest them and bring them to justice."

SALEH 'BELIEVES IN' ISRAEL

¶4. Saleh predicted that US foreign policy in the Middle East would not change much under the Obama administration, opining to French television that, "American foreign policy is agreed upon between the Republicans and Democrats and does not change when the president changes." However, with the Russians, Saleh offered his analysis of the American historical role in the Middle East peace process. Going back to President Reagan and continuing on to the election of President-elect Obama, Saleh went on to recount the seemingly unchanging nature of US foreign policy towards Israel. From Saleh's perspective, "there has been no substantial change, especially in its prevailing bias towards Israel....Obama comes and someone else goes and we do not expect anything new from the American position towards Israel unless there is a unified, public position on the establishment of the Palestinian State amongst the Democrats or Republicans, and the removal of Israel from occupied Arab lands - first and foremost Palestinian lands."

¶5. Saleh goes on to explain his view of the Arab position on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Saleh, appearing to ad lib, said, "We are not saying to them to throw Israel into the sea. We believe in the existence of Israel. It exists in the region and we live with it....If a Palestinian state is founded, security will come to the Israelis....Even in the shadow of American support for them, they will not be able to establish the stability of Israel without the

establishment of the Palestinian state and the withdrawal from occupied lands."

YEMENIS IN GUANTANAMO

16. President Saleh predicted that there would soon be a resolution to the issue of the remaining Yemeni detainees in Guantanamo. Saleh reiterated his government's position that the USG provide evidence of their crimes if the ROYG was to be asked to incarcerate them after their return to Yemen. Saleh said that the ROYG "will receive [the GTMO detainees] and rehabilitate them so that they are positive, productive members of society, they distance themselves from extremism, radicalism and terrorism....We expect the new American administration to release our prisoners and send them to Yemen to serve out the rest of their sentences....It is incumbent upon the Americans to present their files to the Yemen judiciary. They will be tried in a Yemeni court based on the information that the Americans present."

YEMENI ELECTIONS

17. On the topic of Yemen's upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for April 2009, Saleh was quick to deny any potential delays in the voting time-table. Saleh expressed to French TV that the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) would fully participate in the election, promising that the ROYG, "would not take any unfair action in fulfilling its responsibility to protect the peace and tranquility in a general sense and to apply the Constitution and the Law." On Russian TV, Saleh offered a warning to the JMP, saying that, "We are not against one party standing alone in power." Saleh went on to criticize elements of the JMP who he characterized as seeking to "rule and oppose at the same time."

"I WARNED THE WORLD 18 YEARS AGO ABOUT PIRATES"

18. Saleh criticized the international community for ignoring what he sees as the underlying issue of the piracy crisis, the lack of a central government in Somalia. Speaking to Russian TV, Saleh criticized the US and the EU for ignoring the issue of Somalia. "We have discussed this issue with the United States and the European Union over the past eighteen years....It was necessary for us to work to re-build the Somali state and its institutions because the collapse of this country will cause damage to international safety and security. Unfortunately these countries did not respond positively to this request." Saleh posited that a coordinated international effort, centered in Yemen, would be the only way to effectively combat piracy. On French TV, Saleh called for the establishment of an anti-piracy center in Yemen, saying that, "We are ready to set up this center in Yemen in order to gather together the international efforts to combat sea piracy be they from the Somalis or others."

COMMENT

19. Saleh's on-the-record press availabilities with Russia Today and TV France are extremely rare examples of Saleh's direct foreign media engagement, preferring to deliver most of his messages through his own government-controlled media mouthpieces. Several Yemeni journalists have opined to Emboff that Saleh's decision to appear on French and Russian television can be seen as a calculated effort by the ROYG to wage a "charm offensive" on two key trade partners for Yemen. The Russian interview also can be viewed in the context of his long-anticipated official visit to Moscow, now expected to take place this month. End Comment.